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On Politics

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Kickin' around education reform again

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Like a cat playing with a dead mouse, Hawaii's Democrats have batted around education for more than a decade.

Each biennium called up a new group of well-intentioned legislators and governors eagerly slipping on the mantle of educational reform to join the quest for improved test scores, clean, safe schools and more textbooks.

But like the previously mentioned rodent, school reform just lay there.

Gov. Linda Lingle markedly raised the stakes this year after spending the summer vowing to make education the No. 1 issue. Lingle did just that. She campaigned on improved education, hammered away night after night in meetings from McKinley to Mililani for her plans to torpedo the existing school structure and replace it with independent school boards.

It dawned on Democrats this year that the Republican governor now is identified with a cause and issue that had been a Democratic birthright: quality, equal public education.

Lingle has performed a neat act of political triangulation by plucking education reform from the Democrats' quiver and making it her own sharp-pointed arrow. The only miscalculation appears to be that the Democrats' reaction plunged the

state politicians into a religious war. Republicans and Democrats have been reduced to reciting arguments from the "for local school boards" and "against local school board" catechisms.

For many voters, the debate today is about whether the Democrats will be an impediment to Lingle's drive to reform education, not whether seven school boards or 17 school board members will challenge our students to learn well.

Perhaps the Democrats last best hope was Charles Toguchi, Hawaii's longest-serving superintendent of education. Born the eighth of nine children of immigrant Okinawan parents, Toguchi was a high school math teacher, labor organizer and state legislator before taking over the top job at the Department of Education. His plan to reform education in Hawaii aimed right at the heart of the DOE bureaucracy.

Dubbed Ke Au Hou, "A New Era," Toguchi's creative plan would have reassigned 1,000 school officials and made another 630 change jobs. From his first speech to his last, Toguchi called for decentralizing the DOE. Toguchi battled the Board of Education, the unions for teachers and principals and the whole DOE bureaucracy from 1987 until 1994 and in the end, saying "I've given it my all," Toguchi resigned. Project Ke Au Hou was dropped by the incoming superintendent.

Toguchi, a strong Democrat, was snapped up by former Gov. Ben Cayetano as his chief of staff and during negotiations with the teacher's union, Toguchi was able to both increase teacher's pay and force them to work more days.

Although he won't second-guess Pat Hamamoto, the current DOE superintendent, Toguchi's plan struck at the heart of DOE bureaucracy and still has its supporters.

Today, Democrats and Lingle are firing at each other instead of the DOE problems and the hope that Hawaii's public school kids will graduate from the schools they deserve grows weaker.

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